

Matthew Wilcox

Resident of New Haven, Vice President of the New Haven Board of Education

General Comments: HB-6659 AN ACT CONCERNING THE STATE BUDGET FOR THE BIENNIUM
ENDING JUNE 30, 2025, AND MAKING APPROPRIATIONS THEREFOR.

Senator Osten, Representative Walker and members of the Appropriations Committee. Thank you for this chance to testify on the Governor's proposed budget for childcare and public education. My name is Matt Wilcox and I live in New Haven where I am privileged to serve as the vice-president of the Board of Education and work with the teachers, staff, parents, and more than 19,000 students of New Haven Public Schools. I am here to speak because schoolchildren across Connecticut deserve fully funded, fully staffed schools providing the needed services at the level equal to the need.

In spite of previous good efforts, Connecticut school funding is still regressive, when it should be the most progressive. High-need, high-poverty districts especially need more equitable funding. The Governor's proposed budget for PreK-12 schools is not enough.

Inequitable funding has a profoundly negative impact. This year in New Haven, we are completely overhauling the staffing guidelines for our schools. Administrators and unions representatives are looking at the literature, national standards, and bringing in their deep professional experience to take a thorough look at what staff we need where to meet the needs of the students. And what are they finding? They are finding just how much of a gap we have in terms of staff we can afford to employ, and the staff the kids need to learn and thrive.

One example: 22% of NHPS students are multilingual learners. Some surrounding suburban districts have 4% or 6%. We have more than 70 different languages spoken in the district, by folks from 54 different countries. More students arrive weekly, primarily from Afghanistan and Central America. But the staffing guidelines team is finding we are short dozens of English To Speakers of Other Languages teachers and tutors. This means less needs being met and teachers burning out trying to meet them. And the data shows, burned out teachers leave the district, and even the profession.

And that is just in one area. Our school population includes more than 70 percent of students from low-income families. We have close to 3,000 students with identified special needs, some profound. We have close to 500 students that are homeless. Large percentages of children exposed to trauma. We are a district serving kids with high needs, and need more funding per child to support those needs.

We are incredibly grateful for extra funding that we have received in recent years. New Haven has used COVID relief funds to do things like hiring teachers, curriculum facilitators, psychiatrists and social workers, school counselors, and attendance coaches, but these positions are not sustainable as these grants expire.

Full and equitable school funding means Connecticut is making a sustained investment in the salaries of teachers, social workers, counselors, mental health professionals, librarians, paraprofessionals--helping to keep these folks in our schools and in the profession. Due to budget constraints, our salaries have lagged even other urban districts in Connecticut and we lose staff to neighboring districts that can afford to pay more with the thousands more per student they have.

I urge you to fully fund the ECS formula THIS year, and to find other ways to fully fund the schools in our state. The Governor's budget is failing to do this. The effect otherwise is to say that that a New Haven kid, or Bridgeport, Hartford, Waterbury, etc, kid, does not deserve that social worker or librarian or math tutor. And I know no one here believes that is true. Demand maximum accountability and transparency in return—making equal demands on charter schools as on public schools. As one of the wealthiest states in the country—with a multibillion dollar surplus no less--Connecticut has no excuse not to fully invest so the next generation of kids can learn and thrive.

I appreciate your service to the people of Connecticut. Thank you for this opportunity to testify before you.